



## Life Writing

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## From Writer's Block to Extended Plot: Career Construction Theory and Lives in Writing

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### ABSTRACT

Although intangible, authorial careers are nevertheless material entities that have to be constructed in order to exist and that can be analysed to generate critical understanding of the creative works produced within them. Yet until recently, very little research or scholarly attention had been devoted to the concept of the authorial career as such. This paper argues that the body of work known as career construction theory, which originated in social psychology at the end of the twentieth century, can be used to discuss authorial careers in order to illuminate the relationship between life stages and writing practice in new ways. This is because career construction posits individuals as metaphorical 'authors' of their own life stories, with career counsellors acting as co-authors of the next chapter in an individual's career narrative during times of career uncertainty or vocational change. By identifying certain life themes – or macro-narratives – that transcend the concerns or issues that preoccupy authors at precise stages in their careers (or micro-narratives), it draws attention to a complex dual time frame on which authorial careers are based, emphasising a combination of sameness and difference over time.

### KEYWORDS

Career construction theory; narrative method; life themes; vocational personality

In a recent study of modern literary careers Guy Davidson and Nicola Evans (2015, 3) suggest that among the different sub-branches of literary study, research into authorial careers remains underdeveloped. This underdevelopment implies a relative neglect of the concept of an authorial career as a discernible artefact that, although intangible in a physical sense, nevertheless has certain material properties and characteristics that can be identified and analysed in order to generate new understanding of the writing process. Over the long term such neglect was partly a result of the dominance of Anglo-American New Criticism during the mid-twentieth century; the key position occupied by Barthes's commitment to the 'death' of the author within French theory; and even Foucault's treatment of the author as a 'function' of wider networks. Although critical attention has subsequently 'returned' to the figure of the author in a variety of ways (Burke 2008, 89), the materiality of the authorial career as such remains under-conceptualised.

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This paper argues that the body of work broadly referred to as *career construction theory* provides a rich, flexible and potentially auspicious set of critical resources for generating a better understanding of a writer's career. A short first section charts the evolution of career construction as a practice that emerged out of earlier forms of vocational guidance in the early and mid twentieth century in response to the altered economic and cultural conditions of the turn of the century and since. As will become clear in subsequent sections, the transition from a quantitative counselling practice based on numerical scores and psychometric profiles towards a narrative practice that is more qualitative in nature parallels the transition that has taken place within literary scholarship away from a conception of the author as somehow immune to critical consideration towards new forms of engagement, emphasising both dialogism and connectedness. This parallel is highly suggestive of a potentially fruitful intersection between career construction theory and authorship research, a potential that becomes even greater given the literary metaphors that pervade career construction theory. For example, one of the leading exponents of career construction theory, Mark Savickas, summarises it in the following way:

When individuals seek career counseling they have stories to tell about their working lives. The stories usually tell how they have been dislocated from an occupational plot that they had been pursuing or about how they have completed a chapter in their career stories and need to turn a new page. Clients seek assistance from employment counselors to overcome the writer's block or narrative confusion that they experience as they move into the next chapter of their career story. (Savickas 2011b, 179)

Career construction practitioners liken periods of change and uncertainty within their clients' careers to forms of writer's block. The career counselling relationship then posits counsellors and their clients as joint authors of new chapters in a gradually unfolding story, of which the client is simultaneously the reader and the protagonist. This means that the literary component of career constructionism is not merely a suggestive metaphor for identifying different outlines of potential careers but is rather a fundamental aspect of the narrative method by which career counsellors and their clients conceptualise different career stages in a manner that was not possible using the methods of earlier forms of vocational guidance.

Beyond the suggestive parallel histories of vocational guidance and authorial research mentioned above, and beyond also the preponderance of metaphors of authorship within career construction theory, there is also a third basis on which career construction has the potential to be used to conceptualise life writing in new and innovative ways. Career construction treats clients seeking employment guidance as so many authors seeking to identify and develop new plot lines and hence produce a new form of narrative. In the case of life writing, though, this comparison is neither purely metaphoric nor abstractly conceptual because it is already material instantiated in the precise career in question. In other words, as the final section of the paper will argue, when career construction theory is brought into the domain of life writing research, it has the potential to emerge as a new way of thinking about the relationship between lived experience and writing practice. As will become clear, the term *career* in career construction theory should be interpreted widely – it is not simply about selecting jobs, roles or professional fields. It refers to people's vocational and ethical choices much more generally, including the roles they play and decisions they make outside their immediate working environment.

It also creates opportunities for identifying thematic interests and the relationship between work and life during particular life stages. Before exploring this possibility in detail it is necessary to discuss the historical emergence of career constructionism and its major components.

## Background and contexts

Like any discipline, career counselling is a field with a discernible material history. According to Kobus Maree, the first ‘helping model’ available to people in their working lives was that of so-called ‘friendly volunteers’ (Maree 2013, 18). During the period 1850–1910, an increasing number of agricultural workers in Western societies left the farms and estates on which they had worked to seek other forms of urban employment and were advised on an ad hoc basis by people whom they perceived to have a greater level of prior experience in the new environments. That this period also coincided in time with the emergence of the work of Sigmund Freud is also noted by Maree, who sees in this coincidence possible evidence of a growing turn towards the psychological dimension of modern counselling (although he also notes certain limitations of the Freudian model). Maree suggests that vocational guidance as such was invented by Frank Parsons in 1908 in response to the needs of a changing population and workforce two generations after the Industrial Revolution. A third ‘wave’ in the history of the field came about after the Second World War, with the growth of international corporations characterised by new ‘bureaucratic hierarchies’ that often left people uncertain about their place and role in a given organisation so that ‘vocational guidance personnel’ became re-created as ‘career counsellors’ (Maree 2013, 19).

Of most importance to the emergence of career construction theory is Maree’s fourth wave. This is a phase within the history of careers education corresponding to a new stage in the history of industrial society and hence in social relationships. It is a stage that Mark Savickas (1993, 205) has referred to as the ‘postmodern economy’ of the last decade of the twentieth century, a time when many of the working conditions and career assumptions that characterised the earlier periods had either vanished or been fundamentally transformed so that the expectation of steady employment in a single industry had been replaced by a greater prevalence of flexibility and change. Accordingly, career theories that emphasise stability and continuity are unlikely to be of use to clients seeking career guidance, especially when compared with approaches that emphasise the management of a changing career. According to Mary McMahon and Mark Watson (2011, 148), the development of career construction theory was accelerated following the publication of Larry Cochran’s *Career Counseling: A Narrative Approach* in 1997 in order to meet this new need. Maree (2013, v) suggests that the new practice was then developed to a higher degree of elaboration in the work of Savickas, ‘career counselling’s most eminent scholar’, as a direct contrast to the forms of counselling that typified the earlier periods.

Savickas characterises the original form of vocational guidance as one that sought to adopt a falsely objective perspective on individual differences, and hence treated clients as actors who could be scored on one or more personality and aptitude tests in order to match them to occupations employing people with similar scores. The career education of mid century, in contrast, attempted to take a more subjective approach to individual development and treated clients as ‘agents who may be characterised by their degree of

readiness to engage developmental tasks appropriate to their life stages' and who may be 'helped to implement new attitudes, beliefs and competencies that further their careers' (Savickas 2011a, 8). This means that its practitioners moved away from the generalising approach of their predecessors, but still remained trapped within a somewhat diagnostic model of career development.

The practice of career counselling that emerged during the postmodern economy was different again, since it treats the career as an artefact that has to be actively constructed rather than as a given, and hence as something that can and frequently does undergo significant change. Evaluating the meaning of that change to the individual in question is then more important than simply assigning him or her a new role so that the qualitative aspect of vocation has attracted more theoretical attention than it did during the earlier periods. This means that a 'vocation' need not simply refer to a job or career as such, and reveals the full extent of available vocational desires. In turn, the qualitative worth of those desires and aspirations is expressed through dialogue and narrative. A career construction counsellor engages a client in a series of interviews in which he or she maintains at all times an un-knowing stance, thereby posing a series of questions to the client and elucidating from him or her an unfolding realisation of what matters most in his or her life. This commitment to raising questions reveals the common origin of contemporary counselling in Freudian psychology where a similar practice arises. The difference is that, for the career counsellor, unlike the psychotherapist, the goal is to listen to the client's revelations and then convert them into a career narrative based on the client's own words and including a potential new chapter in that narrative. Or as Savickas (2011a, 8) puts it, when comparing career construction with both vocational guidance and career education, 'career counselling, from the project perspective of individual design, views clients as authors who may be characterised by autobiographical stories and who may be helped to reflect on life themes with which to construct their careers'.

In fact, the relationship between counsellor and client in career construction practice is one of co-authorship, or co-construction. Through dialogue, the client supplies the narrative raw material that the counsellor converts into a narrative of self and of career across different roles and periods. In this way, the new paradigm that career construction brings forward addresses what can otherwise be a troubling sense of the individual's non-self identity with prior incarnations of himself/herself over time. It moves away from notions of the self that are essentialist and unchanging, and embraces a sense of the self as always coming into being through social construction and interaction. This transition of course is mirrored by different ways of understanding both the career itself and the physical locations in which the work of that career takes place. Like definitions of the self that have emerged as a result of post-structural linguistics and psychology, neither a career nor a workplace can be assumed to remain static within the postmodern economy since the fundamental characteristics of that economy are variation and evolution. Indeed, the mutually constitutive relationship that exists between a sense of self, a place of work and a professional status is one of the key insights of career construction theory. As a role changes, or a transition is made from one profession to another, or from one location to another, the relationships in which the individual is involved change and that person's sense of self accordingly changes. Narrating the changing sense of selfhood arising out of those changes, while also keeping sight of what remains consistent across them, is in large part the purpose of career construction theory.

## Recurring components

Perhaps befitting its status as a relatively new field of research, there is no precise consensus among practitioners of career construction theory over its primary components. Cochran's early work provided a critical vocabulary and hence a set of linguistic resources for use among practitioners in the field by elaborating a series of subtly nuanced distinctions between seemingly related concepts. Since clients typically enter career counselling at a time of uncertainty or troubling change, the career narratives that they develop must be finely attuned to the difference between ideal new career chapters on the one hand and what is both actual and possible on the other. This distinction is important because it is rarely possible for the career counsellor to promise clients seeking or needing a new working environment that they can do absolutely anything. There are a range of external limitations on what can be achieved, ranging from educational level and subject specific expertise to family circumstances, degree of potential mobility and so on. Peter McIlveen refers to these considerations as *exo-themes* because they are outside the control of the individual, who must therefore attempt a meaningful compromise with them in the development of a new career narrative that incorporates the ideal with the possible (McIlveen and Patton 2007, 74).

This sense of meaningful compromise should not suggest that the client is simply a passive experiencer of external fate. A second distinction adumbrated by Cochran is that between the script of a patient (or even a victim) and that of an active agent. In his account, creating a new sense of self requires bridging the gap between actual and ideal (or possible) subject positions. In turn, this bridging is enabled in and through narrative: Cochran emphasises that a person can only become what he or she has the capacity to imagine and hence narrate. Thus creating a new narrative of self also implies the crossing of another gap in the individual's self-concept, from spectator to narrator and hence to active participant in the story being told: 'a spectator is impotent without a participant, and a participant is vacuous without a spectator. The two modes of being work together to make up a person' Cochran (1997, 25). Cochran identifies these two modes of being as significant elements in the making of new vocational decisions.

In fact, the decision-making process itself is the third major element of career construction theory as Cochran describes it. Following his distinctions between actual/ideal/possible narratives, and between patient-victim/agent/participant scripts, the third conceptual distinction he makes is between so-called first-order evaluation mechanisms and second-order evaluative processes. In effect, first-order evaluation mechanisms are the analytical tools that were developed during earlier stages in the history of career counselling and aimed at quantifying how effectively a role or environment might satisfy a client's vocational aspirations. Although these mechanisms are not of no value at all, Cochran suggests that they are inflexible in addressing either altered personal circumstances or changing aspirations across a lifetime. Second-order evaluation is therefore less about how effectively certain desires are met, and more deeply about the qualitative worth of the desires one has in order to determine which ones should be prioritised: 'The question of efficacy is subordinate to the question of priority' Cochran (1997, 18).

This final distinction between efficacy and priority implies one of the key questions for clients in career counselling: how do they define 'ideal' narratives in the first place? As will be argued below, engagement with this complex question is one of the many ways in which

career construction theory has the capacity to shed light on current critical approaches to life writing. In both career construction and writing practice, the question of what constitutes good work is highly dependent on the values of different individuals in very complex and varying contexts. There is no one-size-fits-all model. For instance, Cochran says that, in choosing between two or more different vocational options, the counsellor might ‘name a few pros and cons’ for the client but the question of qualitative worth cannot really be resolved in this way. He therefore concludes, ‘[to] determine priority, one must shift to a deeper level. Better or worse *for what, or to what end?*’ (Cochran, 1997, 85, emphasis added). In turn, this question itself can only ever be answered in a partial and highly provisional way, subject to continual reflexivity and revalidation. In other words, career construction theory shifts the notion of what constitutes an ideal state from a universalist position to one that is highly contextual and contingent upon local circumstances. The same will be argued below of literary evaluation. Since the purpose of developing a career narrative is to create a new chapter that can be converted by the client into future action, Cochran ultimately refers to the counsellor and the client as ‘co-researchers’ Cochran (1997, 92) and even ‘co-authors’ Cochran (1997, 95).

In Cochran’s seminal account, then, the three pillars on which career construction theory is built are the shift from actual to ideal/possible narratives; the transition from patient or victim scripts to those of an agent or author; and the altered emphasis between first- and second-order forms of evaluation. As noted above, however, the field has expanded rapidly since 1997 so that it has become possible for McIlveen to suggest a slightly alternative structure for career constructionism in practice. Drawing on Savickas, he defines the three main components as the articulation of a vocational personality, the embrace of career adaptability and the interplay between different life themes (McIlveen and Patton 2007, 68). Maree, in turn, supplements both sets of features with a fourth concept, that of *intentionality*. This is important because in his account the intention to derive signification and meaning from vocational actions requires the storytelling approach to constructing careers that is the really new element in the field (Maree 2013, 50). In turn, that narrative practice can be used to illuminate the material properties of a writer’s career: for a long time considerations of authorial intention were out of favour in literary study but have more recently re-entered the arena.

This brief discussion of some recurring components in career construction theory reveals one thing, namely, that the terminology employed by different practitioners is inconsistent. Some of the terms overlap and intersect while in other cases apparently similar terms are used to refer to radically different concepts. This is why McMahon and Watson (2011, 2) have suggested that the ‘literature in career psychology is generally recognised as being more theoretical than practical’. A case in point is a distinction to which Maree draws attention between career constructionism and career constructivism. Constructionism tells us that how an individual apprehends reality is the result of interpersonal relationships and so is socially constructed. Constructivism, by contrast, emphasises that reality is constructed within the individual psyche at the intra-individual level and hence is psychological. However, Maree (2013, 34) concedes that practitioners have a frustrating tendency to use these terms interchangeably.

Despite the terminological variation that pervades the field, this tendency also has the capacity, by contrasting example, to focus attention on what is consistent: specifically, the recurring use of narrative practice and authorial metaphor that do not vary from



practitioner to practitioner. Having identified that there is this conceptual consistency beyond the occasional semantic difference, it also becomes possible to group related terms together into three broad components of the field. These can be described briefly as the narrative method for career construction, the interplay between one or more different recurring themes within that narrative and the reflection on experience that is enabled by counsellors on the part of their clients specifically by encouraging them to envisage themselves as authors of their own career narratives.

## The narrative method

According to Savickas, what typically prompts clients to seek career counselling is some major change or fragmentation in their professional life that they cannot accommodate into their known patterns of life and work. The attendant uncertainty over how to deal with this challenge creates a form of anxiety and pressure that grows until a point at which those known patterns have to be changed in order to accommodate the new experience, expectation or demand. He refers to this starting point as an experience of *disequilibrium* (Savickas 2011a, 43), literally an experience of being thrown off balance by an unexpected or unforeseen set of circumstances. Maree (2013, 32) adopts a similar tone when he counterbalances Savickas's idea of *disequilibrium* with the concept of a *career crossroads*, and Cochran (1997, 9) talks about the same initial experience in a discussion of the mechanics of a *decision situation*. Thus, the naming of this initial event that drives clients to career counselling is a further instance of the varied professional vocabulary within career construction, arising out of its status as a new and still emerging field where the critical terms are not yet settled in a dogmatic way. Yet *disequilibrium* is a concept highly suggestive both of the literary foundations of career construction theory and of how it has the potential to be re-applied to discussions of careers in writing for the reason that disequilibrium itself is a highly literary concept. It is frequently invoked by practitioners of creative writing, sometimes under the related name of the *inciting incident*, as the necessary starting point for the plot or action of a fictional work.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of an occupational plot, that is, the idea that a working life has a trajectory that can effectively be understood as a form of narrative, was developed by Savickas through mobilisation of the distinction he found in the work of E.M. Forster between *story* and *plot* (Savickas 2011a, 93). According to Forster's distinction, mere story is simply a list of roles or actions without a sense of what melds them together. Plot, in contrast, has an element of causality built into it and hence is capable of expressing a relationship of integration among otherwise disparate story elements. When applied to careers, the shift from mere story to relational plot expresses a shift from listing roles divorced from context towards evaluating the qualitative worth of those roles on the part of the individual client. These things have to be recovered and constructed through narrative during the counselling relationship. To achieve this recovery of a thematic meaning (that is often only latent to the client), the process takes the form of one or more career interviews, which are written up as case studies.

During the career interview, Savickas typically asks his clients for three of their earliest recollections. The factual content of these memories is less important than the sense of self evinced by the individual narrating each of them. Maree also draws attention to the importance of the counsellor paying precise attention to the active verbs selected by the client for



the expression of his or her role in the event being recollected. These too can provide rich sources of latent meaning and value, or provide a sense of the client's fundamental perspective and orientation towards the world. Drawing on a distinction originally penned by Welty (1983, 14) between listening *to* a story and listening *for* a story, Savickas explains that the role of the counsellor is to listen to what might initially appear as an incoherent or unconnected stream of recollections, sift out what is inconsequential and identify the recurring themes of the career in question. These are then narrated back to clients in a way that provides them with new self knowledge and enables them to make future decisions in a highly self-conscious way.

Savickas's application of the model suggested by Welty is an instance of the literary foundations of career constructionism. As we have seen, career construction theory is based on the methods and paradigm suggested by literary practice, which are then applied in the sphere of professional guidance. One of the assumptions of the theory appears to be that people's reading habits, aesthetic and genre preferences, and cultural choices of a very wide range can be used to reveal underlying aspects of their vocational personality. The assumption is that this complex data, once released, then has the potential to be used by the individual in question to gain a greater degree of valuable self-knowledge and hence to make future decisions that profoundly affect their life and work. Thus Savickas suggests that, following the discussion of early recollections, the next important section of a career interview is when the counsellor asks the client to identify particular role models, who could be people they know, public figures whose work they admire or even fictional characters (Savickas 2011a, 57). Whether someone's readings preferences can readily be used to extrapolate characteristics of a professional or vocational nature (and if so, how) are questions outside the scope of this paper, although it is perhaps significant that Wayne C. Booth (1988, 278–279) made a similar suggestion in one of the first studies of authorial careers, *The Company We Keep*. My own central argument is not about reader affect *per se*, and proposes that, since career construction is fundamentally about the relationship between life stages and writing practices, it has the potential to conceptualise the field of life writing in new ways.

### Life themes and life stages

The main insight of career counselling is that a simple list of roles, occupations or even achievements will not effectively enable a client to make a decision about a new career stage because if expressed in an objectively factual way these are devoid of subjective meaning and value. The principal bearer of subjective meaning is derived from what Savickas calls the client's *career theme*. This is the governing idea within a person's life story, the sense of vocation, purpose or aspiration around which other meanings and values tend to cluster: 'As individuals incorporate new experiences, they use the implicit theme to comprehend the plot episodes by imposing the pattern of meaning on them' (Savickas 2011a, 26).

Implicitly, the construction of a career narrative entails a dynamic interplay between two different timeframes: isolated, one-off or short-term incidents on the one hand, and a larger story into which these can be integrated following the principle suggested by the career theme. Savickas refers to the stories that clients tell about one-off incidents or their working life over a relatively short period of time as *micronarratives* because they

describe local-level incidents that have not yet been incorporated to a longer-term history, or *macronarrative* (Savickas 2011a, 22). To continue the authorial analogy, a micronarrative is like a short story or chapter that when excerpted from the anthology in which it was published or the novel of which it is a part provides less meaning and fewer connections than it does when read as part of those wholes. The plotting of micronarratives onto a macronarrative gradually gives rise to a discernible pattern in which certain symbolic behaviours are repeated and recur: 'In the end, the pattern in a life reveals people to themselves and others' (Savickas 2011a, 25).

As noted above, there is a tendency among practitioners of career construction theory to use different terms for fundamentally similar components of their practice. This tendency is perhaps most evident of all in the subtly different terms that have evolved to identify and evaluate the existence of one or more themes within the career of particular individuals. Thus whereas Savickas situates his micro- and macronarratives within an overall story organised according to the meaning generated by the *career* theme, McIlveen refers to micro- and macrothemes that have the potential to be assimilated to a superordinate *life* theme. He asserts that, of the different components of career construction theory, the relationship between different levels of life theme have been the most under-analysed so far (McIlveen and Patton 2007, 68). If Savickas's micronarrative is a description of a short-term occurrence it is divested of meaning, because it is not yet accommodated to the macronarrative. The shift that McIlveen makes from micronarrative to microtheme apparently reveals an attempt to generate meaning and signification even in the micronarrative. The macrotheme is then a combination of a macronarrative plus a career theme. Then again, one of the insights of career construction theory is that people make professional and career choices as a result of all sorts of factors, some of which are often extrinsic to the profession or working environment itself. This is perhaps why McIlveen subtly shifts the focus from *career theme* to *life theme*, in order to flag up this combination of elements that are intrinsic to the working sphere with elements that are external.

Cochran suggests that a career narrative has the capacity to create meaning on behalf of its author-protagonist in three different ways. First of all it provides a temporal structure; second it configures a number of disparate elements into a whole; and finally it has a wider purpose or goal that it ostensibly moves towards (Cochran 1997, 5–7). In discussing the assembly of disparate elements into a coherent narrative Savickas compares the role of the career counsellor to that of a museum or art gallery curator (Savickas 2011a, 68). In preparing an exhibition, the curator does not simply assemble a collection of works at random, but tends to gather them together according to some kind of governing principle or logical narrative. Very often this order is imposed through recourse to the chronological development of the works, or through their relationship to the work of other artists on display, or by the elucidation of recurring thematic elements. Works of fiction tend not to be read in the same way that works of visual art are viewed: there is no requirement for a gallery or physical location, so that a virtual 'exhibition' of written works by one or more writers can be convened wherever or whenever a reader reads those works. Nevertheless, the allusion to the curatorial element is instructive in thinking about authorial careers too, mainly because of the way it invites us to group like works together according to the principles mentioned above: chronology, relationship or theme. In the case of an author's career, Savickas's micronarratives would then provide a means to categorise together works produced within distinct stages of the writer's life. However, the stages

are not to be seen as mere periods of time. On the contrary, because they are constructed either through recourse to the relationships evinced by different works within them or through the thematic continuity between them, the career stages are better conceptualised as the attribution of thematic meaning to work produced *in* specific stretches of time than as chronological portions of the career defined in a linear sense.

Perhaps most important of all when thinking about the relationship between life themes and life stages is the shift proposed by contemporary career construction theorists from a model of life stages that is mainly linear, sequential and chronological to one that expresses overlap and interrelationship. Because career constructionism takes a holistic approach to life narratives, its scope is not limited solely to professional roles or decisions taken as part of someone's working life. On the contrary, it emphasises that the roles that people perform in their non-professional lives are likely to inform the career decisions they make. This means that career construction theory is concerned to unlock the narrative potential of a life as a whole, as opposed to a narrowly defined career or professional environment, in understanding rich sources of meaning and value to the person in question. Many of the roles that people perform are loosely vocational rather than professional as such: parent, child, friend, neighbour, volunteer and so on, all in addition to one or more working roles, which cannot therefore be considered mutually exclusive. Ideas, attitudes, competencies and orientations associated with one role often carry over into another.

This emphasis on the interrelationship between professional and non-professional roles interrogates, complicates and updates the main assumption of one of the first studies of writing careers. Edward Said argued in *Beginnings* (1975) that the main difference between literary production during the twentieth century and earlier historical periods is that writing at those earlier periods was primarily a vocation, whereas during the twentieth century it had become a professional career (Said 1975, 227). Career construction theory modifies Said's position by revealing that even in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the vocational element is as important as the professional in defining a writer's career.

If different life roles are treated as interrelated and overlapping rather than discrete, the same is true of the life stages associated with each role. It would be misleading to think of life stages as following a sequential trajectory with each role succeeding the previous and giving way to the next. In other words, just as it is possible to occupy several different roles simultaneously, so too different life stages overlap, interact and exist within complex multiple time frames as opposed to a purely linear sequence. This superseding of a linear chronology with a new model integrating complexity and interrelationship between micro- and macrothemes has significant implications for how we think about the material components of a career and hence of a life in writing. I have argued separately that an under-recognised feature of Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* (1973) is that he identifies different career stages that writers move through following a complex time frame rather than a simplistic sequence.<sup>2</sup> However, Bloom's commitment to a narrowly defined canon of artists has resulted in his work lapsing out of critical currency, with the result that the aspect of it that implicitly considers the material properties of writers' careers has received little attention. Forging connections between career construction theory and life writing has the capacity to address this lacuna.

## Reflection on reflection

So far, this paper has concentrated on people's capacity to write their own career narratives, thereby acting as authors seeking to move into new phases of their professional lives and so curing their metaphorical writer's block. Indeed, the paper has suggested that this is literally what writers do when they create a new work, or a set of works that can be considered tantamount to a distinct stage within their career. The consideration of the client as the main character in his or her life story is then a further instance of the potential applicability of career construction theory to life writing.

In the section on narrative method above the fundamental assumption is that career construction starts when things have changed for the client. The postmodern economy that Savickas describes is one where people are likely to work not just in a number of different organisations but also in several fundamentally different professions during the course of a 'portfolio career' (Handy, cited in Maree 2013, 17). This means that major career changes are likely to occur more than once for any individual. The question to which clients seek answers from career counsellors then becomes what happens when things change *again*. Yet the whole point of career construction theory is that the counsellor cannot answer this question until he or she has elicited a deep, rich and latent set of core meanings and values from the client. In other words, the answer to the question of how to manage transition when change re-occurs comes not from the counsellor but from the client, whom the counsellor helps to elucidate and clarify it in a relationship of co-creation and joint authorship.

The primary resource that counsellors are able to make available to clients in addressing not just a change but *another* change is to reflect on how they reflected during the last period of change. In other words, it requires a very deep level of reflection on reflection, or what Savickas (2011a, 15) calls 'awareness of awareness'. That is, constructing a career narrative through several different life chapters elevates the practice of reflection onto a meta-reflective level: clients who have undergone several different vocational changes do not only reflect on what they did in each earlier role, but on how they reflected on it when making a transition into a subsequent role.

The purpose for clients in career construction is to evaluate the qualitative value of their different competing goals and aspirations, the better to be able to prioritise between them. Once this is achieved, it becomes possible for the client to construct out of the different micronarratives a coherent theme capable of transcending different life stages, changing interpersonal relationships and varied working roles. The capacity of the life theme to transcend those separate priorities across different time periods is made possible by its coherence as such. 'A theme in a macronarrative traces how a person is identical with self despite diversity across micronarratives. Even when everything seems to change, the theme remains the same' (Savickas 2011a, 26). In turn, the coherence of a life theme across varying life stages emerges as a result of the integration of the different roles and relationships into a career narrative with a recognisable character arc.

Savickas describes the character arc as a person's characteristic movement through life, addressing in the process a problem or set of problems that the individual wishes to solve above all else. It is a metaphor highly pertinent to considerations of changing life stages because it conceptualises a dynamic interplay between sameness and difference within a developing narrative. The point is not so much to embrace notions of selfhood that are

either essentialist or static or even easily demarcated as it is to ‘author a narrative identity that sustains sameness yet accounts for change’ as clients ‘reposition themselves in social space’ (Savickas 2011a, 21). Since it avoids assuming that there is such a thing as an essential self, the concept of the character arc raises the issue of subjective identity as an open question to which the answer is always to some degree in flux, even though in periods of turbulent or troubling change, clients might want to unearth and cling to the comfort of belief in an unchanging self identity.

Savickas describes people’s desire for the apparent safe haven offered by notions of an essential self as the process whereby they ‘work out the problem of their sameness across time’ (Savickas 2011a, 26). It is problematic because the desire for comforting sameness conflicts with the gradual realisation that when the surrounding environment, role and relationships have changed, the sense of self changes too – even at moments when reversion to an earlier selfhood seems most tempting. This is why the plain concept of the character is supplemented with that of the arc, or developing trajectory, that is capable of reconciling continuity and change. It also accounts for the increasing practice whereby people who have suffered one or more traumatic experiences employ life writing as a means of working through those experiences via symbolic repetition with gradual variation so that the meaning of the experience can be contested and re-created.

The construction of the self expressed by a character arc is dynamic and developing rather than a stable finished entity. To some extent the same is true of life themes themselves, because the identification and repetition of a theme is not merely a matter of uncovering pre-existing facts in a person’s biographical history. On the contrary, it is a question of making new meaning for past events so that they can be used to tease out deeper understanding of an apparently changed set of contemporary circumstances. Thus Savickas suggests that a narrative is necessarily a form of dialogue between past experience and present context, rather than a purely factual report of past events. For this reason, the factual accuracy of the narrative is less important than the meaning and emotional truths associated with those experiences by the client. It is these rather than a bare list of roles and dates that will enable the individual to gain new understanding on contemporary circumstances even when the surface content of the different experiences appears unrelated. As Savickas puts it, ‘the theme repeatedly *re-members* – that is, reinterprets and reconstructs – the past to meet the needs of the next scenario’ (Savickas 2011a, 35, emphasis in original).

It is at this point that career construction theory can most effectively be re-connected to life-writing practice. Doing so has the potential to develop a new way of thinking about the relationship between life experiences and writing, and hence of theorising authorial careers. The kinds of truth that representations of the self in writing are able to tell depend more on the symbolic or emotive aspects of truth-telling than they do on factual veracity or literal verification. When Savickas talks about the importance of using a transcendent theme to bring past experience into constructive dialogue with present uncertainties, this has two important implications. First, it suggests that the theme itself is a tool that can be used to gather resources laid down in the person’s prior life history and feed them forward into the present and the future. When this happens, different emotional responses or latent meanings associated with a particular past experience could be used to illuminate different challenges in the present and in the future. In other words, different aspects of past experiences speak to present and

future life chapters in different ways. In this sense, the past experiences themselves can appear to change in retrospect. Autobiographical reasoning is then the form of intellectual behaviour best associated with career construction practice. It is also one of the important attributes available to writers, as they use that same evaluative process to revisit the major themes and subjects that have concerned them throughout their past work and find new ways of presenting them in a present or future work.

Second, the application of autobiographical reasoning to endow past experiences with new contemporary meaning underlines the element of symbolic repetition in career construction practice. The life theme expresses the central preoccupation or challenge that the client wishes to solve, and the character arc in his or her career narrative reveals his or her repeated engagement with that problem throughout diverse stages in an unfolding career. Savickas states this combination of repeated returns to an initial challenge succinctly when he notes '[r]epetition aimed at mastery composes the life theme' (Savickas 2011a, 33). In authorial careers, the themes are often easier to discern in retrospect than while the career is still in progress. Savickas's term 'repetition aimed at mastery' bespeaks a classical, if somewhat outmoded, image of authorship invoking the solitary genius who, through continual striving after perfection arrives at a degree of mastery of the craft. Although current literary scholarship tends to downplay the notion of individual genius in the process of literary creation in favour of collaborative networks and material relationships,<sup>3</sup> it is still possible to identify distinct and recurring themes across the works of contemporary writers, especially practitioners of life writing.

## Conclusion: career construction and life writing

This paper has argued that there is the potential for using the tools and methodology of career construction theory to reinvigorate contemporary approaches to life writing in a number of ways. It started by suggesting that the history of career guidance represents a trajectory away from mechanical and quantitative approaches, embracing aspects of vocational personality that are better elucidated through dialogue and narrative than by means of computerised aptitude tests. It also highlighted that this disciplinary history was suggestively paralleled within literary study by the history of authorial research, which once disavowed critical interest in the author altogether and then explored the author as a manifestation of a wider and somewhat abstract system of economic relationships before turning attention to the individual empirical author only relatively recently.

As we have seen, the dialogism that is inherent in the method of career constructionism tends towards the co-creation between counsellor and client of a career narrative with the express purpose of writing the next chapter of that story and so empowering the client to embrace the role of protagonist in it. Not only does the metaphor of joint authorship neatly inform current critical approaches to authorship, it is also partly informed by them. This is because recent research has emphasised the collaborative nature of literary creation and so disavowed the idea of the solitary genius that typified dominant images of authors in earlier periods. Moreover, career construction and writing practice have a partly common origin, since the development of career construction theory draws widely and openly on concepts and techniques more usually associated with writing fiction and creative non-fiction than with vocational guidance. When these concepts are treated at the abstract theoretical level, they reveal a preponderance within career counselling of



metaphors of authorship, which career counsellors use in the development of techniques for facilitating their clients in the writing of new life narratives and the assumption of new character arcs. Given the application of literary techniques to the practice of career counselling, this paper has in effect taken a complementary approach: applying the insight of career construction to the theoretical discussion of writers' lives and careers, thereby marking a shift in conceptions of authorship from the metaphoric to the material.

This approach has the advantage that it restores a critical notion of intentionality to discussions of life writing. Although it may not be possible to excavate individual empirical authorial intentions when reading a given writer's work, the career construction definition of intentionality as the intention to make meaning seems highly pertinent to authorial research, where the creation and exegesis of meaning is often the explicit aim. Moreover, as in career narratives, the kind of meaning that can be achieved should not be considered as settled at any point in the author–reader relationship. This is partly because the kinds of truth that narratives can reveal are symbolic as opposed to factual, and partly because contemporary interpretation of past events and experiences (including the reading of earlier written works by the same person) is wont to change every time a new intervention is made.

Intentionality, then, is more about the discovery and identification of a life theme than it is a question of reading the text for traces of its author's internal thought processes, which are in any case unavailable. In career construction, the combination of life theme and character arc reveals a combination of change and continuity over time, as people return at different points to address again a challenge or pre-occupation that had already engaged them, in different ways. In fictional practice too, the material careers of individual authors evince discernible themes emerging over the course of lengthy periods of time. Moreover, there is also the possibility that the career trajectory as a whole comprises several different artistic themes, each of which is expressed in works produced during different career stages. Needless to say, such stages are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but are rather overlapping and interrelated, since the author is likely to return to several different themes during the course of an overall career. For this reason, the stages that comprise a career and a life in writing are more properly defined by the relationships between thematically congruent works than as empty stretches of time within the chronology of the author's life.

Finally, career construction theory has the capacity to provide a new means of making aesthetic value judgements. The question of what constitutes good – or better – art has often suffered from the same charges of subjectivity and absence of material evidence as the related notion of authorial intention. However, just as career construction has made it possible to re-consider intentionality, so too it becomes possible to think again about the question of aesthetic judgement. The crucial emphasis of career construction theory is on the need to evaluate different desires and aspirations that cannot be expressed quantitatively in order to be able choose between them through assigning qualitative priority. What constitutes success, or merely good work, for a person at a particular stage in their life or career will not necessarily constitute success in another, since these things are prone to evolve and develop and are subject to continual modification on the part of the individual whose aspirations they express. In other words, the definition of good work is rendered by career construction theory partial, relative and highly provisional rather than objective or unvarying. Given that a life in writing has the capacity to incorporate several different



microthemes, and given also that the notion of intentionality reveals the commitment to expressing those themes in varying ways across different life stages, this insight into the provisional nature of value judgements has the potential to be applied to discussion of literary works. In other words, it reveals that the author expresses different themes during different stages of his or her career, that what constitutes good work in one stage is therefore necessarily different from what defines success in another and that different works from within a given author's career might therefore more effectively be judged through different measures than through recourse to any overriding and illusory notion of objectivity.

## Notes

1. See for example Doubtfire (2003, 12) and Kroon (2010, 332).
2. Dix (2017, 135–136). See also Bloom (1973, 121; 130).
3. See Curran (2000, 215–239).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Hywel Dix* has published extensively on the relationship between literature, culture and political change in contemporary Britain, most notably in *Postmodern Fiction and the Break-up of Britain* (Continuum, 2010) and *After Raymond Williams: Cultural Materialism and the Break-up of Britain* (University of Wales, 2013). His wider research interests include modern and contemporary literature, postmodernism, critical cultural theory and autofiction. His monograph about literary careers, *The Late-career Novelist*, was published by Bloomsbury in 2017 and an edited collection of essays on *Autofiction in English* is due out with Palgrave in 2018.

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